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Managing professionalism: an ethnographic study of a public education bureaucracy in the Australian context

Introduction

The ideological agenda driving public systems, over the last three decades, have been commented upon by many scholars (Britan and Cohen, 1980a, Britan and Cohen, 1980b, Clarke and Newman, 1997, du Gay, 2005, Marquand, 2004, Miller and Rose, 2008, Osborne and Gaebler, 1993). Some scholars note the shift from professionalism to managerialism (Clarke and Newman, 1997) while others note that the move to decentralise services from the bureaucratic organisation to the local level often resulted in the strengthening of central control and regulation (Blackmore, 2004, Karlsen, 2000, Hoggett, 2005). Yet other commentators describe the shift as one from big government to little government (Ball, 2006, Lingard et al., 2002) or as a move from rowing to steering (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993) or as a shift from government to governance (Gjelstrup and Sørensen, 2007, Miller and Rose, 2008). However, despite the increasing interest in public systems, the people who populate such systems are often overlooked. Whether bureaucrats are deemed uninteresting or just inaccessible, there has been a distinct lack of attention given to bureaucrats in research. While the bulk of the research mentioned above, makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of what has happened to bureaucratic organisations, the voices of the people inside these organisations have been muffled by the surrounding clamour. This paper aims to address that gap by examining the working lives of the people inside an Australian State education bureaucracy. It allows their voices to be heard and demonstrates that similar trends have pervaded this organisation that work to reshape the identities of those who populate it.

The bureaucratic organisation in this study, Central Office, was grounded in the Australian tradition of a centralised education system that controlled the

resources to schools (Lingard et al., 2002:7). This study captures a moment in time in this organisation, a moment when changes were made to what was valued. The political rationalities, that were driving the change to Central Office and the manner in which schools were resourced, were legitimised by the rhetoric of a document initiated by the head of the organisation. I will argue that the changes were driven by strong neo-liberal discourses that resulted in a shift from a bureaucratic organisation that valued professionalism and expertise to one that valorised managerialism and performance technologies.

Professionalism in the public sector

The shift in the goals of public administration resulted from an increasing distrust of the cold monsters of the state (Hoggett, 2005) responsible for the production of indifference (Herzfeld, 1993) and were to blame for creating inefficient organisations that were both costly and slow. Governments are increasingly using 'neo-liberal strategies that aim to make public services more productive and accountable' and remove power from the self-interested professional (Zafira and Davies, 2007:260). Society has increasingly become the object of politics rather than the subject of politics (Pusey, 1991:10) and the shifts have transformed many of these institutions through a strengthening of managerial practices.

In 1980 Lipsky analysed what he called, 'street-level bureaucrats'; teachers, police and social workers, people who serve the public, in the public services. He was interested in how they developed techniques to maintain services within the limits imposed by the structure of their work. He noted that they were presented with a dilemma between serving the state and serving the public. Nearly three decades later the dilemmas faced by Lipsky's street-level bureaucrats are acknowledged by Gjelstrup and Sørensen (2007) who note that the dilemmas have been transformed simultaneously with the shifts made to the structure and framework of these organisations. No longer were the bureaucrats secure in life-long positions but are now employed on contracts that could be terminated from

one day to the next. The stability of the tasks they carry out are prone to changes of government, or whims of new ministers; transformations that were a reality for the people in this study.

Lipsky (1980) advocates professionalism in bureaucracy, as professionals are committed to solving service dilemmas. He suggests that the lower level officers will have claims to professional status but they are also bound by their bureaucratic status that requires compliance (1980:19). The lower level workers often do not share the same perspectives as their superiors and therefore cannot be regarded as working towards the same goals particularly if they are alienated in some way from the client, or from the organisation. In this case study I will demonstrate that the people at the bottom were alienated from the rest of the organisation and had closer relationships with the client, the schools and teachers. This creates a role ambiguity that has an effect on the individuals in the organisation and the image of the organisation as a whole (Lipsky, 1980:48). The lower level workers are concerned with a role interest in the job, while the managers are interested in results.

Lipsky (1980) warns against the removal of professionals from these organisations as it could be potentially damaging and lead to an increase in the gap between ideals of theory and realities of practice. The relevance of such observations is portrayed in the data gathered in this study. I identified two distinct perspectives on the goals of the organisation. I refer to them as bureau-professionals and bureau-managers. These terms are borrowed from Clarke and Newman (1997). In brief I define the bureau-professional by expertise and an ethos of provision of a service to the school and the bureau-manager by their managerial role within the organisation and their focus on task completion. This paper focuses on the changing work and identities of the bureau-professionals. Their identities were shaped by past narratives, experiences and relationships that were founded in the knowledge and pedagogies of the program they delivered to schools.

From state provision to state regulation

In their study of the British Welfare system, Clarke and Newman (1997) identified ways in which forms of privatisation were introduced by the sale of services and outsourcing and by blurring boundaries about what was regarded as a service. The decentralisation of services and the strengthening of managerial techniques to control and monitor the administration of the public service resulted in changes in the techniques of administration. Clarke and Newman (1997:22) argue that public administration has shifted toward a set of practices and values that are separate from the content and character of the services that are delivered. They suggest that there is no link between 'better efficiency' and the outcomes the organisation is trying to achieve and that better efficiency is often achieved by increased management and a decrease in the number of professionals.

Decentralisation is a strategy that is used to shift responsibility to the local, in a rhetoric of enabling and empowering while a framework for accountability is constructed through techniques of assessment and evaluation.

> The new form of state is not just about the organisational systems through which services are delivered. It involves reconfiguration of power in the pattern of provision, and changing definitions of individual and collective responsibility, which lie at the core of the policy changes themselves (Clarke and Newman, 1997:27)

Services previously delivered by the public sector are now outsourced. The outcome has been the loss of the professional from these organisations in preference for managers who focus on ends rather than means, on action rather than reflection. Clarke and Newman argue that if organisational identity is now the major focus then the 'old' forms of loyalty, and the people who are committed to these, have to be replaced or have to change (1997:63). What is created are 'new managerial subjects with rather different sets of loyalties and identities from

professionals and bureaucrats' forging values that can be defined and measured (Clarke and Newman, 1997:94). The economic and managerial ideology underlying 'new public management' 'aspire to work on people's identities and minds' (Olsen, 2008:24). In this way power is reconstructed through particular modes of attachment. The conceptions of good administration and good administrators are constantly changing; identity and boundaries of public administration are more contested and less clear. Individual and collective responsibility has become defined by the rhetoric of policy. Control and monitoring is carried out by organisations that have subtly shifted from providing resources and services to evaluating, assessing and regulating. The shift from professionalism to managerialism, the withdrawal of services and a focus on ends rather than means are illustrated in the data gathered in this Australian education bureaucracy.

The case study

Inside an Australian State Department of Education for ten months I observed the working-lives of the people in Central Office. The organisation was responsible for 780 government schools and over 22,000 teachers. Consistent with the broad thrust of strategies that are often associated with neo-liberal reform, a document that stipulated a focus on successful students, excellent teachers and good schools was released. To achieve the goals of the document, centrally run literacy and numeracy programs, previously delivered by Central Office staff, were withdrawn. The schools were allocated the resources in the form of funding to make them autonomous and responsible. For the people inside the organisation who delivered the programs this meant a dramatic change in their work. Their close relationships with schools were severed and their vast knowledge of mathematical learning and pedagogical expertise was lost to schools.

As the section delivering programs to schools was restructured to reflect the changes proposed in the document, the confusion and lack of understanding

about the reasons for the changes became obvious. Strong neo-liberal discourses provided the basis for changes that resulted in a shift from a bureaucratic organisation which valued professionalism and expertise to one that valorised managerialism and information systems. Paradoxically the document stipulated a focus on explicit teaching practices and a strengthening of teacher quality which were fundamental elements of the abandoned numeracy program, yet those driving the changes appeared to be unaware of the scope of the programs; ignoring or obscuring their valuable and effective practices in preference for the neo-liberal rhetoric of decentralisation, autonomy, and responsibility.

Methodology

In this study I used ethnographic methods, including participant observation, combining participation in the field (without ever taking on tasks for the organisation), getting involved as much as possible, being an insider and, being an observer; watching, recording, noting, while endeavouring to remain to some extent an outsider. As an international student with teaching experience in European countries I really was an outsider.

I was allocated a desk, in the open office space so that I could observe and interact with people around me, closest were the four women of the numeracy team that delivered a Professional Development numeracy program to schools. Sitting at the desk, in front of the computer, I blended in with the surroundings. Employment in the organisation was often transitory and people came and went and new faces were not uncommon. The desk that I occupied was one left empty by Deborah. Deborah had been part of the numeracy team but had, at the time of my study, been promoted to line manager for the team. She had been allocated the glass walled office of the previous line manager and I had been given Deborah's old work space. Everyone in the section administering programs to schools had been informed of my study and I was presented as 'the researcher interested in understanding how bureaucracy works' – a line which always

provoked a reaction in the form of smiles or laughter. I engaged with Lisa, Laura, Rachel and Deborah, the four women from the numeracy team daily and established close contact with them throughout my study. I observed them and quickly became involved in their interactions with others. This close contact allowed me to gain a deep understanding of their procedures and protocols. They included me, where possible, in all their meetings inside Central Office and in the workshops they delivered to teachers. I filled note-books with my observations, took detailed notes at meetings and, when I felt it was appropriate, asked to record the meeting, usually if there were no more than three participants. They often worked outside Central Office delivering Professional Development workshops to train numeracy specialists and I was invited to attend these. The workshops, took place in hotel function rooms around the city. At the workshops, I requested time to talk to the teachers about their relationship with Central Office in general, and about the workshops, in particular. I also accompanied each of them when they visited teachers and principals to schools throughout the state, the geographical enormity of which would stagger many Europeans.

Agents of change

The literacy and numeracy programs, delivered by the teams inside Central Office, were part of an initiative by the State government to improve teaching practices in schools where there was low achievement. In this paper my focus is on the team delivering the Professional Development numeracy program. The program was used to train teachers to become specialists in numeracy and was founded in complex learning strategies that took account of the development of mathematical learning and employed diverse pedagogies.

The numeracy team, like the rest of the staff were former teachers. The following is a brief account of the birth and life of the numeracy program gathered from conversations with members of the numeracy team. The team were recruited into positions by Central Office from the classroom where their expertise had been acknowledged. Initially they were asked to develop numeracy learning

materials the development of the programs came later. They were given one year to produce numeracy resources that teachers could use in the classroom and they worked hard to produce the material to the deadline. However there was little research into how children learned mathematically so a local university was requested to collaborate with the team to develop material. The numeracy team became part of the university research team and worked innovatively alongside academics with research experience. Guided by the experts at the university the numeracy team used their considerable classroom experience and expertise to examine how, as Lisa told me, 'children think and learn about number and measurement'. This was ground-breaking research, exciting, but not without difficulties. The numeracy team had to learn to analyse, to question, and to reflect, in a manner that was new to them. However the work, based on research and evidence from actual classroom situations, was intensive and stimulating. Gradually they built up a deep understanding of how children learned mathematically, and determined how the learning strategies were developed in stages. When the work was complete the numeracy team were asked to develop a Professional Development program for the training of specialists in numeracy. Teachers attended a series of workshops delivered by the numeracy team over a two year period. Between the workshops the team visited the teachers in their schools and followed up on their progress. Although the program had been running for over seven years the team had continually adjusted it according to the needs of the schools.

They worked in an organisation that put in place centralised programs that were well researched and effective. Their professionalism, deep knowledge and expertise made them 'agents of change' (a phrase used by Lisa). Lisa expressed her belief in the power of the program in this way:

> It is a feeling that you can produce change in a fairly major way
> through the ST (Specialist Teacher), because the ST is then going to

        have all those teachers coming past them. So you think about that

        degree of change that you can achieve!

The team were innovative and creative they reflected and responded
autonomously to the needs of teachers and students adjusting the program
accordingly aware of the diversity of the leadership, staff and students in the
individual schools throughout the state. Each member of the team talked about
the importance of maintaining an ongoing relationship with schools,
understanding the problems and the diversity. Lisa talked about the autonomy
that the team enjoyed and the professional role that they took in adjusting the
program. They were respectful of each others knowledge and expertise and
understood the need to build up close relationships with teachers and principals
in schools throughout the state. In the workshops and on the visits to schools
their conversations were about explicit learning strategies and about
understanding pedagogy. I witnessed how the program caused teachers to re-
asses their teaching practices, making them more explicit and more purposeful.
By giving teachers pedagogical strategies that related to the development of
mathematical learning of their students, combined with supportive assessment
strategies developed by the team, the teachers were able to change their
teaching practices in a supportive professional environment. Another team
member, Rachel had worked as a specialist in a school and was now part of the
Central Office team. She told me that schools were confident in the program, 'it
was well researched, well constructed, and it was central and everybody got the
same message'.

Public education for the public good
On one occasion I asked Lisa about her role in the bureaucratic organisation.
She told me that she could not imagine herself in a job where she was 'stuck in
the office.' It was important for her to be able to maintain an active contact with
schools, to be physically able to visit different schools and understand at first
hand the diverse range of teachers and students. Through their continual

reflection and adjustment the program was made effective in tackling the realities of the classroom. The numeracy team worked from a particular set of values, beliefs and commitment to the system in which they worked. They were public servants working in their capacity to serve the state and serve the client. For these women there seemed to be no particular dilemma.

I was curious about what the numeracy team regarded as the role of Central Office. As a team they were to some extent isolated from the workings of Central Office. They were often the last to know when decisions had been made. Lisa claimed that there were people who were good at 'corridor policy talk' and that she was not. I asked her what she meant. Lisa told me that she was only interested in running the program and making sure that it worked for schools, she was not interested in promoting herself, either to her managers, or to her Director and, she implied, there were those who did.

Bureaucratic organisations become embedded with meaning for those who inhabit them, just as the people who inhabit them reflect those identities and meanings (Shore, 2000). In many ways the team worked and reacted independently of the rest of the organisation. Somehow they were 'out of the loop', and, if I understood Lisa correctly, this was by choice. Certainly with regard to the changes that were to arise from the implementation of the document and the restructure, their political positioning and knowledge of what was about to happen were minimal. The hierarchical structure of the organisation ensured a delegation of work from the high, policy level strategic planning to the low, technical administration and practical delivery of services. However the flow of communication that informed policy upward from practices and from policy intentions to practices seemed to be in tension.

I questioned the members of the numeracy team about their role in Central Office and what they felt the centrally run programs could achieve. Lisa reflected firstly on being part of the Central Office team and on the strength of being in Central

Office where there was 'a clear idea of its Professional Development,' and 'professional idea of what we want teachers to learn', and 'being a central initiative, where you have the same message going out to everyone.' The idea that the public system was able to mediate a central initiative that was well-researched and continually developed is a strong one. The team believed that a properly structured and resourced system was and could continue to make significant changes to teaching practices and to the achievement of students. Their understanding of the role of Central Office was based on the traditional provision of centralised programs that were centrally controlled.

In this study the dilemma recognised by Lipsky (1980) and others would be between being loyal to the schools and being loyal to Central Office, but as Lisa has demonstrated with her comments, as long as they were able to use their autonomy and adjust and adapt the centrally run programs to the needs of schools, there was no conflict between being loyal to Central Office and being loyal to schools. This conflict was however hovering on the horizon. Although their commitment and passion for educational values was unified it did not match the changes that were about to take place and which were based on a different set of values.

From passionate people to dead bodies
The team were somewhat passive about the restructure of the organisation and the withdrawal of the program, telling me that, although they knew the program would change, they did not know what form it would take, and what message they could give to schools about the extent of provision of numeracy support. The team began to feel increasingly insecure and because of this felt that they were less effective. They were given different messages; the line manager told them the program was 'winding down' and the Director told them to 'do less work in schools.' Rachel said she felt they were 'treading water a little bit because we couldn't make promises. Lots of people need to know before they get something, they have to know, what is the commitment behind it?' Remaining committed to

the programs was problematic in the face of the insecurity. If the restructure was going to change the form and content of the work, what would that mean for the numeracy team? For them maintaining a strong relationship with schools was crucial to carrying out their work effectively. None of the numeracy team regarded 'sitting at a desk', writing policy documents, or guidelines as an effective manner in which to provide support schools, to develop and to change teaching practices.

I asked Lisa if changes could just as easily be achieved by teachers working in networks, through mentoring and from having an explicit policy framework that provided the teachers with a structure and goals, as was suggested in the document. Lisa explained that the document was just that, a text. The text had to be understood, interpreted and implemented into practices. Lisa maintained that teachers would continue 'doing what they did' and that the production of the document did not mean that their practices would change as a result. Lisa understood that changing teaching practices required time, time to learn, to reflect, to interpret and to share experience. The role of the organisation, in her opinion, was to have people in positions like hers to do the interpreting and to facilitate the implementation. Without that expertise the connections between ideology and practice would be lost.

The funding previously allocated to the program was now allocated directly to schools. The programs were officially abandoned. The team now sat at their desks. As time went on, the tasks the team were asked to do gradually changed. They were increasingly called upon to put material online for teachers to access. Deadlines were made and the administration work gradually took up more of their time. Not only the numeracy team but the whole section delivering programs was now focusing on strategies, frameworks and legislation to simplify and make access to the organisation easier for schools. The numeracy team found themselves sitting in front of their computers on a daily basis and contact with schools was solely by telephone and email. In a conversation with Lisa she

commented on her new tasks and the lack of face-to-face contact with schools 'you know what we are Sarah? We are just dead bodies. I don't want to be a dead body, but that is what they want, us sit in front of our screens and do the job.' Her comment about becoming a dead body stayed with me and was indicative of the inertia I was witnessing. For Lisa, as with the others in the team, becoming a bureaucrat, 'a dead body', meant not having the contact with schools that they felt was crucial to understanding the realities faced by teachers. A year after the programs were withdrawn three of the four members of the numeracy team had chosen to leave the organisation. In other sections the bureau-professionals took long service leave, in the hope that things, as one manager said, 'might settle down', others applied for jobs outside the system in local universities or simply went back to their school. There was an exodus of people at this level of the organisation.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the numeracy team who delivered the program to schools worked as professionals. The program they delivered was well researched. It built on ground-breaking knowledge of how children learned mathematically and used a wide range of pedagogical methods to train teachers to become specialists. I have demonstrated that the team had autonomy to adjust the program, to work reflectively and develop the program according to the needs of the individual schools. They built strong relationships with schools that took time to establish. Their strong relationships and commitment to teaching practices worked to alienate them from the rest of the organisation. When the programs were withdrawn the numeracy team were expected to put the programs online as a resource that could be used by all teachers. The close contact with schools was severed and their work became one of administering and managing online resources, at a distance. The new practices worked to separate them from their relationships with schools and according to Lipsky (1980:79) should have worked to make them more willing to accept the organisational restructuring. They were unable to reconcile themselves to the

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shifts towards a further entrenchment of neo-liberalism in practice that transformed the organisation from one that previously held strong public education values to one that focused on management and control. They felt undervalued, over-looked, unfulfilled and frustrated.

The organisational focus was on results and ends rather than means and action rather than reflection. The criticism of the bureaucratic organisation meant that it was given the blame for the educational outcomes. These findings support Ozga (2009:149) when she suggests that the metamorphosis of centralised systems from a 'centralised, vertical and hierarchical form of regulation into decentralised, horizontal, networked forms' are not always straightforward. Change is messy and ambiguous.

What is demonstrated here is the shift from government to governance, specifically a shift in the form and process of regulation. The change in the control and use of resources, the legislative change as a form of regulation and the decentralisation of funding to schools accompanied by new centralised practices of management were claimed to 'provide more democratic and accountable schools through improving the quality of education' (Lindblad et al., 2002:620). In the transition from government to governance, the decentralised, autonomous forms of power were undermined or subordinated through the reliance on managerial accountability and 'continued strong steering' of a centralised system (Ozga, 2009:159). The decentralisation of services to schools had the effect of devolving the risk for Central Office and placed the responsibility with the schools. For the schools with low student achievement and less experienced teachers the responsibility may be too great without the support that the organisation provided through the programs.

I began this paper by commenting that bureaucratic organisations such as this one were often given the blame for failing and as a result the organisation of the administration had shifted. Praising bureaucracy is not as easy as blaming and

finding fault with it. But can a centralised system be good, in the sense that it provides support and sustainable interventions that improve teaching quality and achievement of students? Certainly in the past the centrally run programs seemed to provide real support to schools. The decentralisation of services, the abandonment of the programs, left schools with the responsibility for sourcing the help they needed to up-skill their teachers. The bureau-professionals delivering the programs were able to establish intimate relationships with schools and use their expertise to build powerful programs that responded to the needs of the disparate range of students and teachers. Without these people and without these programs, what then would the future for the bureaucratic organisation be? The role of organisations, such as this one, has certainly shifted from government to governance, changing the relations between those they serve and subordinating the role of the professional.

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